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ABSTRACT

A study explored strategies for improving the involvement of parents with children with disabilities in rural schools. Data collected from 52 parents of children with disabilities in Central Virginia rural schools supported several findings of earlier studies conducted among lower socioeconomic groups. Answers to open-ended questions in the survey revealed some possible obstacles to participating in school related activities. Reasons included interference with job schedule, transportation difficulties, single parent home situations, lack of child care, and inconvenient meeting times. Another reason cited was that teachers did not pay attention to parents or did not respect their opinions. The parents identified three major needs: training programs, support groups, and teacher contact and recognition. The following recommendations are provided for increasing parental involvement: appointing a home-school liaison, using parents as recruiters, training active parents, meeting in an informal setting, seeking parents' interests and needs, recognizing parents' efforts, establishing a network with community resources, being optimistic, involving parents in the decision-making process, offering literacy training programs, organizing community projects, being flexible with timing, and establishing top to bottom responsibility. (Contains 15 references.) (CR)

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Running Head: MEETING THE NEEDS OF RURAL PARENTS

Meeting the Needs of Parents of Children with Disabilities in Rural Schools

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Abstract

Although research on the benefit of parental involvement has revealed improvement in students' academic achievement, student motivation and dropout rates, parental participation remains low. Research has also shown that traditional methods of involving parents do not normally work with parents of children with disabilities, especially if they are from lower income, rural areas. However, innovative methods based on parental needs have shown significant success. Data collected from 52 parents of children with disabilities in Central Virginia rural schools identified several factors that inhibit parent involvement. Recommendations using a family-centered model to meet parents identified needs are outlined.

Meeting the Needs of Parents of Children with Disabilities in Rural Schools

Today's teachers believe that parents can and should do more to support their children's education both at school and at home. Dowd, Hess, and Nickles (1996) reported that teachers from urban schools are doing good to excellent jobs in getting parents' involvement in both educational and non-educational aspects. Nevertheless, many urban teachers still believe that parents fail to motivate their children and/or they take too little interest in their children's education (Met Life, 1998). A study by Katsiyannis and Ward in Virginia (1992) found that, although the State of Virginia has been partially successful in providing opportunities for parents to be involved in the education of their children with disabilities, the parents have admitted to not participating fully. Shea and Bauer (1991) also reported parents' lack of participation despite their recognition of the importance of their involvement. The 1998 Met Life survey of teachers' responsiveness showed that teachers working in the poorest communities rated the parents' availability more negatively than those working in more affluent communities. More teachers working in communities with lower median incomes believed that parents take too little interest in their children's education than those teachers working with parents from higher income strata (Met Life, 1998). Although numerous studies have been conducted regarding the reasons for poor parental involvement and the methods of improving involvement, only very few researchers have attempted to investigate the needs of parents of students with disabilities who attend rural schools.

Parental Reasons for Non-Participation

Leitch and Tangrin (1998) reported that parents of children with special needs face many economic and personal hardships. Work schedules, transportation, and childcare problems make it very difficult for parents to attend meetings and/or to volunteer for other activities. Parents also seem to avoid interactions with schoolteachers

due to the fear of being blamed for their children's problems or being considered ignorant. Poor parental involvement can be due to many other factors as well. Some parents of children with disabilities were themselves placed in special education classes or experienced difficulties some time during their schooling (Diamond, 1994; Finders & Lewis, 1994). These parents often hold stereotypical attitudes as a result of their negative school experiences. Another reason for non-participation cited by Diamond (1994) is parents' limited skills in helping children with their homework. School assignments today are more complex and technologically oriented. Consequently, parents may find it difficult to assist their children with project requirements even if they have the desire to do so.

Many of the graduate students in our special education program are teachers working in rural schools. One of the most frequent topics of discussion in many of their classes is the difficulty getting parental cooperation and involvement. With the idea of better serving our students, we conducted survey research in 1998. Results from the fifty-two respondents' data supported several findings of earlier studies conducted among lower socioeconomic groups. The annual income of three-fourths of these respondents fell within the range of $10,000-$35,000. The level of education attained by two-thirds of the respondents was that of high school or lower. Nearly half of the respondents were single mothers (Mathews, 1998).

Answers to the open-ended questions in the survey revealed insights of possible obstacles for not participating in school related activities. Their reasons included interference with job schedule, transportation difficulties, single parent home situations, lack of childcare, and inconvenient meeting times. Another reason cited was that teachers did not pay attention to them or did not respect their opinions. This finding is consistent with a study by Salisbury and Evans in 1988 which showed that parental satisfaction was dependent on demonstrated benefits of their involvement. In addition, a majority of the parents said that they did not help their children with homework because teachers did not

give them guidance. About two-thirds of these parents did not get involved in any parent groups while one-third did not even know the existence of such a group in their children's schools.

Parental Needs

Our study found that 89% of the parents are interested in increasing the level of their involvement if they are requested to do so by the teachers. This finding deserves prompt attention of the school authorities. The three major needs identified by the parents surveyed were training programs, support groups, and teacher contact and recognition.

1. Training programs. Parents expressed a strong desire to have the schools help them know more about their children's disabilities, help them acquire skills in managing their behaviors at home, and receive guidance with their children's homework. These parents also stated that they are eager to learn teaching techniques.

2. Support groups. Parents recognized the benefits of meeting with other parents of children with disabilities on a formal and informal basis. Social activities were suggested as a means of attracting more parents. Parents also thought that such activities would give them the opportunity to interact with teachers and other school personnel in an informal manner.

3. Teacher contact and recognition. Parents felt that knowing how the schools benefited from their participation was essential. They also felt that it was important for teachers to request the assistance they expected from parents. The parents admitted they did not feel comfortable volunteering their services unless they were invited to do so.

Considering the significance of parental involvement in their children's education, schools in rural settings should make every effort to obtain their maximum participation. The following are recommendations for programs that may enhance parental involvement in rural school settings. These recommendations are derived from the needs of the parents and based on successful projects, such as "Families and Schools Together (FAST) in

Milwaukee, The Parent Institute for Quality Education in San Diego, and Epstein's model of school, family, and community partnerships (Epstein, 1995).

1. Parent support groups. A home-school liaison should be appointed. This person might be one of the active parents or one who understands the culture and background of the parents. This home-school liaison should use several techniques to recruit new members. This recruitment might be accomplished by techniques such as sending brochures or letters with school children, and posting brochures in community locations such as fast food restaurants, laundromats, grocery stores, churches, and social service agencies. Liontos (1992) recommended hanging banners from public buildings displaying names and telephone numbers.

2. Using parents as recruiters. Active parents should be encouraged to inspire and motivate inactive ones. These parents can serve as greeters at the school gates and in hallways to give information about parent support groups and their activities. Such parents are found to be very effective when they underwent leadership training (Liontos, 1992).

3. Training active parents. A team of teachers and administrators from schools should offer parent training sessions. The programs should offer training in empowerment, parent involvement, advocacy, and action. A successful Program in San Diego, California offered courses for parents in student development, family interaction, school-home accountability, and school culture. Parents who have been successful in advocating for their children and working with teachers and school administrators should participate in the training of other parents.

4. Meeting in an informal setting. It is advisable to have the first one or two meetings at a place other than the school premises (Finders & Lewis, 1994). Meetings held at fast food restaurants or at picnic resorts will help parents feel more comfortable and relaxed. These meetings venues can be moved to the school when parents feel more comfortable with the teachers.

5. Seeking parents' interests and needs. Finding out what parents would like to do instead of what the school wants them to do will give them a sense of security, respect, and recognition. In addition, planning initial events around issues or activities with broad appeal will also reduce parents' uneasiness and nervousness (Liontos, 1992). Nevertheless, the eventual goal should be to make parents equal partners in decision - making. According to Barnett (1995) such interest seeking activities will provide benefits such as identifying strengths and needs of their child and family, providing insight into the child's abilities in a variety of environments and providing a vision for their child's future.

6. Recognizing parents' efforts. There should be a designated bulletin board in schools where pictures of relevant events can be displayed. Posting names of participants at meetings and events will also serve as an incentive for parents to continue with their efforts. This also will be an incentive for other parents to join the group. Even activities that exhibit sensitivity, trust, respect, and acceptance are good indicators of recognition (Rock, 2000).

7. Establishing a network with community resources. An effective method in helping parents is building a strong relationship with a community-based agency in the neighborhood. Schools should be able to give referrals and direct parents to useful resources. Finding contacts who are sensitive to the needs of the target group also is vital (Liontos, 1992).

8. Being optimistic. Persistence even if the initial attempt is not very overwhelming is found to be the key to many successful programs. Program development will not happen overnight. It requires a considerable amount of time and persistence before progress becomes evident. Expecting every participant to be present at every event is unrealistic (Epstein, 1991). People will choose what they are interested in and what meets their needs.

9. Involving parents in the decision making process. After a few meetings, more parents will be ready to assume responsible roles. Several choices such as parent teacher association, and parent recruitment committee, etc., should be offered so that each parent will have an opportunity to select an area in which he or she is most comfortable. Thus parents' input should be encouraged in each phase of decision making process and parents can be encouraged to identify problems (Mundschenk & Foley, 1994). However, sometimes leadership training may be necessary to maximize their potential.

10. Offering literacy training program. Some parents require training in computer usage, homework assignments, reading and writing programs, etc. Local university students, and professors in teacher education programs will be excellent resources to enrich such programs. "Make and Take" workshops where parents can learn to make educational games and activity boxes and how to use these materials at home will provide excellent educational experiences for the parents.

11. Organizing community projects. Planting gardens, building playground equipment, building sidewalks on school grounds, sewing clubs, cooking programs, etc. have been demonstrated as successful projects in which to involve parents. Successful programs offer many ways for parents to become involved. All parents do not need to be involved in all programs. Moreover, the ways in which particular parents are involved can grow and change over time (Epstein, 1991).

12. Being flexible with timing. Scheduling should be carried out with consideration for parents' availability. Scheduling events that will fit the time frames of working parents and single parents is essential. (Barnett, 1995). Offering parents with choices for the date, time, and location of the meeting should be another consideration in planning any activities or events (Barnett, 1995). Planning an agenda that includes realistic time limits is also critical.

13. Top to bottom responsibility. Begin at the top. A program will not be successful unless there is involvement and support by the administration. School superintendents,

principals, special education coordinators, as well as individual teachers should be involved in all aspects of the program (Epstein, 1991). Epstein also asserted the importance of principals being the catalyst in the success of any program.

Conclusion

The need for parent and family involvement in Special Education programs has been recognized at least since PL 94-142. Yet research has indicated that a large majority of parents remain passive participants. Many parents may not volunteer their help because of reasons including lack of recognition and respect by the teachers. An aggressive school outreach project using a family–centered model is crucial in involving parents of children with disabilities in rural schools. Schools should make every effort to enable parents to take responsibility for their children's education. Successful programs are based on a joint effort among school personnel and parents who freely express their needs and who are encouraged to participate in the education of their children. In order to be equal partners, schools should promote an environment where families, teachers, and administrators work together. The conventional administrative hierarchy must give way to more collaborative relationships. Structures and strategies that permit true collaboration between school and home by giving parents the opportunity to become full partners will enhance parental involvement.

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